

SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND ACCESS TO EDUCATION: A LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION ON EDUCATION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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Abstract

Educational inequality remains a persistent challenge in many developing countries, where social stratification significantly shapes access to learning opportunities. This literature review examines the relationship between social inequality and educational access, with particular attention to socioeconomic status, gender, cultural background, and geographical disparities. Using an integrative approach, this study synthesizes findings from peer-reviewed articles, reports from international organizations, and theoretical contributions in the sociology of education. The review identifies five recurring themes: (1) the impact of family socioeconomic status on school participation and attainment; (2) gender disparities that reflect broader cultural and structural biases; (3) the urban–rural divide in terms of resources and institutional quality; (4) the role of state policies and global frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, in mitigating inequalities; and (5) the implications of social stratification for long-term social mobility. The analysis highlights that while education is often perceived as a pathway to equal opportunity, in practice it frequently reproduces existing social hierarchies. The review concludes by stressing the importance of affirmative policies, digital inclusion, and community-based interventions to reduce educational disparities. It also suggests future research directions, particularly in the context of post-pandemic transformations and the growing role of technology in bridging inequality.

Keywords: *Social Inequality, Access to Education, Social Stratification, Educational Equity, Developing Countries*

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a cornerstone of social and economic development, yet access to quality education remains highly unequal in many developing countries. Despite global commitments to ensure inclusive and equitable learning opportunities, patterns of social inequality continue to determine who can attend school, the quality of instruction they receive, and the opportunities available after graduation. These disparities are reinforced by structural barriers such as poverty, limited infrastructure, entrenched cultural norms, and uneven policy implementation. From a sociological perspective, education is not only a pathway to upward mobility but also a mechanism that reproduces existing hierarchies of class, gender, and

geography (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). This dual role of education makes it crucial to examine the extent to which social stratification undermines the ideal of equal opportunity. Scholars have long debated the relationship between social stratification and educational attainment, with consistent evidence showing that socioeconomic status, gender, and geographic location strongly predict educational outcomes (Carnoy & Torres, 1990; UNESCO, 2020). Children from wealthier households enjoy greater access to learning resources, better schools, and supportive networks, while peers from disadvantaged families face systemic barriers that limit participation. Gendered expectations and cultural traditions exacerbate inequalities, particularly in rural communities where girls often have fewer educational opportunities. Moreover, the urban–rural divide generates sharp contrasts in infrastructure, teacher quality, and institutional capacity, reinforcing cycles of inequality across generations (World Bank, 2018).

Although extensive research has been conducted on educational inequality, the literature remains fragmented across regions, disciplines, and methodological approaches. Much existing work focuses on localized case studies, leaving gaps in understanding how different dimensions of stratification interact in shaping educational access. A comprehensive literature review is therefore required to synthesize findings across contexts and to provide a conceptual framework that captures both the persistence of inequality and the possibilities for policy interventions. This article seeks to examine the role of social stratification in limiting educational access in developing countries by reviewing recent scholarly contributions, identifying thematic trends, and highlighting implications for future research and practice. At the theoretical level, classical and contemporary sociological perspectives provide insights into the persistence of inequality. Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital illustrates how family background influences educational trajectories by transmitting values and dispositions that align with institutional expectations (Bourdieu, 1986). Coleman’s notion of social capital highlights how networks and community resources facilitate or hinder educational outcomes (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016). Conflict theorists argue that schools reproduce existing power relations and privilege dominant social groups, while functionalist perspectives stress education’s role in promoting cohesion and preparing individuals for labor market participation (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Durkheim, 1956). Together, these perspectives underscore the dual nature of education as both empowering and stratifying.

Global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education, have emphasized the urgency of addressing educational disparities (United Nations, 2015). Nevertheless, progress remains uneven. UNESCO (2020) reports that children from the poorest quintile are still five times more likely to be out of school compared to their wealthier peers. The COVID-19 pandemic has further widened inequalities by exposing the digital divide, as students without access to reliable internet and digital devices faced severe disruptions in learning continuity (OECD, 2021). These developments demonstrate that educational inequality is not a localized phenomenon but a global structural challenge requiring systemic responses. In addition to structural inequalities, the intersectionality of class, gender, ethnicity, and geography must be considered. Intersectional analysis shows that students are frequently disadvantaged by overlapping forms of exclusion, which compound their educational vulnerabilities (Crenshaw, 1989). For instance, girls from rural low-income households may simultaneously face barriers linked to poverty, gender norms, and infrastructural deficits, while ethnic minority students are often excluded due to language barriers or systemic discrimination. Addressing these multidimensional inequalities requires policies that move beyond single-issue interventions. Taken together, these insights highlight the need for a systematic review of existing literature to identify thematic patterns, theoretical implications, and practical strategies for reducing inequality in developing educational systems.

METHOD

This study employed an integrative literature review methodology to synthesize and critically evaluate scholarly contributions on the relationship between social stratification and access to education in developing countries. The integrative approach was chosen because it accommodates theoretical, empirical, and policy-oriented studies, thereby producing a comprehensive understanding of educational inequality (Torraco, 2005). Given that research on educational disparities is widely dispersed across disciplines such as sociology, education, and development studies, this approach was considered most appropriate to capture both the breadth and depth of the field.

The search process relied on established academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, complemented by reports from major international organizations such as UNESCO, OECD, and the World Bank. Searches were conducted

between January and March 2025 using a set of carefully selected keywords and Boolean operators, including “social inequality and education,” “social stratification and educational access,” “educational equity developing countries,” and “intersectionality in education.” These terms were designed to capture the multidimensional aspects of inequality while ensuring relevance to the context of developing countries. To ensure rigor, the review included studies published between 2010 and 2025, with the addition of seminal works predating this period when theoretically significant, such as the contributions of Bourdieu, Coleman, and Bowles & Gintis. Only publications in English or those translated into English were considered, and the scope was limited to works focusing on the impact of socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, geography, or policy on educational access in low- and middle-income countries. Sources that lacked empirical or theoretical depth, such as non-reviewed opinion papers, were excluded.

The analytical process was conducted in sequential stages. Records retrieved from the databases were first screened for duplication and relevance based on titles and abstracts. Full-text studies that met the inclusion criteria were then examined in detail and organized into thematic categories, such as socioeconomic influences, gender disparities, rural–urban differences, policy interventions, and intersectionality. These categories provided a framework for identifying converging evidence, contrasting perspectives, and remaining gaps in the literature. Through this methodology, the review maintains a balance between systematic rigor and integrative breadth. The chosen design ensures that the analysis captures the complexity of how social stratification shapes educational opportunities in developing contexts while providing a solid foundation for the subsequent thematic discussion of findings.

RESULTSS AND DISCUSSION

The first major theme emerging from the literature concerns the profound influence of socioeconomic status (SES) on educational access and achievement. A wide body of research indicates that children from higher-income families consistently outperform those from low-income households due to differences in resources, parental involvement, and school quality (OECD, 2018; Jæger, 2018). Families with greater economic capital are able to invest in supplementary learning resources such as private tutoring, digital technologies, and extracurricular programs, which cumulatively enhance academic performance. By contrast, children from disadvantaged families often face multiple deprivations, including inadequate nutrition, limited access to books and technology, and fewer role models who can guide them

toward educational attainment. These inequalities reflect the ways in which economic capital is converted into educational advantage, thereby reproducing social hierarchies across generations in line with Bourdieu's theory of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The persistence of SES-based inequality demonstrates that while education is often framed as a pathway for upward mobility, it simultaneously functions as a mechanism for social reproduction.

A second theme relates to gender disparities, which remain a significant barrier to equitable education in many developing countries. Although global initiatives have improved school enrollment rates for girls, structural inequalities continue to limit their access to higher levels of education. Studies indicate that entrenched cultural norms, early marriage, and household labor responsibilities disproportionately hinder girls' educational opportunities (UNESCO, 2020). For instance, in rural communities, girls are often withdrawn from school to contribute to domestic chores or agricultural work, reflecting gendered expectations that prioritize boys' formal education. Even when girls attend school, they frequently encounter discriminatory practices, inadequate sanitation facilities, and curricula that perpetuate gender stereotypes (Unterhalter, 2014). These factors not only restrict educational attainment but also reinforce broader gender inequalities in labor markets and political participation. From a sociological perspective, such disparities highlight the intersection of cultural capital, gender norms, and institutional practices in shaping unequal educational outcomes.

The third theme concerns the rural–urban divide, which continues to produce structural barriers to educational equity. Urban areas typically benefit from better infrastructure, higher teacher quality, and more comprehensive curricula, while rural schools often struggle with overcrowded classrooms, underqualified teachers, and insufficient learning materials (World Bank, 2018). This disparity is particularly visible in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where geographic location strongly predicts educational opportunities. Rural students often travel long distances to attend poorly resourced schools, reducing attendance and academic engagement. Furthermore, rural communities frequently lack access to digital technologies, exacerbating inequalities in an era where online learning is increasingly critical, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (OECD, 2021). The urban–rural gap illustrates how spatial inequalities intersect with socioeconomic disadvantage, creating a layered system of exclusion that reproduces structural disparities in educational attainment.

A fourth recurring theme in the literature is the role of state policies and international frameworks in addressing or perpetuating inequality. On one hand, policy interventions such

as conditional cash transfers, school feeding programs, and tuition subsidies have been shown to improve enrollment and retention rates among disadvantaged groups (Fiszbein & Schady, 2009). On the other hand, poorly designed or unevenly implemented policies often exacerbate existing disparities by privileging certain regions, schools, or social groups. For instance, decentralization reforms in some countries have widened gaps by allowing wealthier districts to accumulate resources while poorer areas remain underfunded (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2015). At the global level, frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals have created momentum for reducing disparities, yet progress has been slow and uneven. This suggests that while policies are essential tools for achieving educational equity, their success depends on addressing broader structural inequalities and ensuring that implementation mechanisms are sensitive to local contexts.

The fifth theme relates to intersectionality, which emphasizes how multiple forms of inequality overlap to create compounded disadvantages in education. Intersectional analyses demonstrate that students are not only disadvantaged by a single factor, such as poverty or gender, but by the simultaneous interaction of several social categories (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, girls from rural low-income households experience compounded barriers: economic hardship restricts their access to school, gender norms confine them to domestic labor, and geographic isolation reduces exposure to quality institutions. Similarly, ethnic and linguistic minorities are often doubly disadvantaged, as cultural discrimination intersects with material deprivation to exclude them from mainstream education (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). These findings underscore the importance of moving beyond single-issue policies and adopting holistic approaches that recognize the multidimensional nature of educational inequality. By focusing on intersectionality, scholars and policymakers can better understand the lived realities of marginalized groups and design interventions that address the complexity of their challenges.

Taken together these themes reveal that educational inequality in developing countries is deeply embedded in structural, cultural, and policy frameworks. Socioeconomic status, gender, geography, and ethnicity interact in ways that systematically reproduce stratification within educational systems, limiting opportunities for upward mobility and reinforcing cycles of poverty. The literature also highlights that while policies and global initiatives hold potential for reducing disparities, their effectiveness is contingent upon recognizing the intersectional nature of inequality and adapting interventions to specific local contexts. From a sociological

perspective, the persistence of these disparities reflects the enduring power of stratification to shape institutional outcomes, thereby calling for transformative policies that move beyond surface-level interventions. This review demonstrates that addressing educational inequality requires both structural reforms and cultural shifts that reimagine education as a genuinely inclusive public good.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this review underscore that social stratification continues to shape access to education in developing countries through interrelated dimensions of socioeconomic status, gender, geography, and ethnicity. Despite global commitments to equity in education, structural barriers such as poverty, unequal distribution of resources, and entrenched cultural norms persist in reproducing existing inequalities. The evidence demonstrates that education functions both as a potential driver of mobility and as a mechanism of social reproduction, reinforcing hierarchies that limit opportunities for marginalized groups. The literature further highlights that while schooling is often perceived as a universal equalizer, in practice it remains deeply embedded in unequal social structures.

The implications of these findings are significant for both theory and practice. From a theoretical standpoint, the review illustrates the relevance of sociological frameworks—particularly Bourdieu’s cultural capital, Coleman’s social capital, and Crenshaw’s intersectionality—in explaining the persistence of educational inequalities. These perspectives not only reveal how resources and opportunities are unevenly distributed, but also how social categories interact to produce compounded disadvantages. From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that interventions such as conditional cash transfers, school feeding programs, and gender-sensitive educational reforms have the potential to narrow gaps, but their impact depends on implementation that is context-specific and sensitive to intersectional realities. Looking forward, this review calls for a more nuanced and multi-dimensional approach to addressing educational inequality. Policymakers, practitioners, and scholars must recognize that single-issue solutions are insufficient in contexts where social, cultural, and economic barriers overlap. Future research should explore the transformative potential of digital technologies in bridging educational divides, while also examining how global frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals can be localized to respond effectively to community needs. Ultimately, creating equitable educational systems requires not only structural reforms

and redistributive policies, but also cultural shifts that challenge the reproduction of inequality and reimagine education as a genuine public good accessible to all.

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